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Good Shepherd Berkeley

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SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER [AND MOTHER'S DAY]

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 5:1-9

"With a Little Help from our Friends"

The Revelation of John is preoccupied with danger and distress – terror, even. It's strange, then, to come to the end of the book and find ourselves invited into a moment of great beauty and hope: the vision of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth, uniting God and humanity in a new community.

I remember someone back in the '50s, when it was chic to be ever so urban, pointing out that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. That's only partly true. It's a city with a garden that runs right through it: the river, with parkland along either side and, all along it, the tree of life planted, bearing its fruits, a different delicacy every month, and offering its leaves for the healing of the nations.

But it is a city, yes. It's a busy place, with multitudes of human inhabitants. It's also a place of such peace and serenity that it's as hospitable to the introvert self as to the extrovert self. And God lives there with God's people, completely accessible, perfect in beauty.

Is this a literal description of heaven? No, literal descriptions of heaven are quite beyond our power. Nor is it one of those picture postcards that are so perfect they threaten to make the actual reality a bit disappointing. This is better than literal. John has captured for us, in poetry, the *soul* of the age to come, what it might *feel* like to live in a perfect human and divine community.

Now, I really like the image of the parkland, the trees, the river. After all, I like to garden and I like to have a little hermit time. But what I particularly want to point to today is the other side of the image. The age to come is imagined as a *city*. There are lots of people.

They're not dangerous to us. The dangerous ones, the sort who might try to create a self for themselves by destroying some other self – they'd hate it there. They'll go off and find a place where they can prey on each other. I don't say they'll be happy there. But they'll be less unhappy than they would be in John's New Jerusalem, where they'd be powerless to beat up on anybody.

But there are lots of people. And there's no end of time and opportunity to meet them, get to know them, laugh and tell stories over a good dinner, come to understand one another just a bit. And, as we come to understand others, we also come to understand ourselves a bit better. And, best of all, there is time and opportunity for the most wonderful thing in human

life to flourish – affection, connection, a sense of genuinely knowing and being known, the new and larger life that comes with life being shared.

Whatever *exactly* the age to come may be, it won't, I think, be *less* than this. Why? Because this is what we human beings are made for. Anything less would be a terrible waste.

Yes, of course, we don't *know* a thing about the age to come. It's not a subject of knowledge. It's faith and hope and love that point us toward it, not knowledge. And they're able to point us toward it because it's already at work around us and in us here and now.

Think of the story we read from John's Gospel. This man has been lying there, paralyzed, in a busy, noisy public place for years – to no purpose because, without somebody's help, he can't take advantage of the healing waters. It's a parable of human life in general. However much we are able to accomplish under our own steam, we're always hedged around with limits and challenges against which we're helpless without the help of other people.

We need the help of others. We also have the astonishing power to *extend* help to others. We all have the ability to transform the world in which other people are struggling. Much of the time, we may not even know we've done it. But every time we do it, we are uncovering, revealing the life of the age to come right here in this life.

That's what our life together is ultimately about: the giving and receiving of gifts, the transformation that our gifts make possible. We can choose, of course, to disrupt the exchange. And sometimes we do. Or we can choose to offer our gifts and accept those of others and so be part of the great exchange between humanity and God, between humanity and humanity.

What else is the life of the church really about? We get distracted, of course, and begin to act as if the church were all about preserving an institution or maintaining a hierarchy or imposing an orthodoxy. But, no, church is really about starting to live the New Jerusalem here and now – in whatever limited way is possible here and now.

Humans only function well when we're in generous relationship with others. I remember many years ago coming across a passage by William Blake, the poet and painter. He was proposing an immense painting (that he never got around to painting), and one group of figures in it he described as "those who could not be saved except by the immediate inspiration of God or by the advice of a friend."

Now, we might hear that "advice of a friend" as a kind of officious thing: "You know, you're really a mess, but I'm your friend and I have a bit of advice for you. You really have to quit . . . whatever." No, no. The other word in the phrase is the important one: the advice of a *friend*. A friend can do for us what we might think only God can do: can transform our sense of self and our sense of the larger reality around us so that we can discover new possibilities of joy and peace.

That's why the life of the age to come is imaged forth as a *city*. It's a place with many opportunities for friendship.

Church, of course, isn't the only place where we practice this. Families can be another such place. Today is Mother's Day. And you may well have noted ere this that Episcopalians don't tend to make much of Mother's Day. Well, you know, we've got our own festival calendar, don't we? one that's way older than Mother's Day. And we always have the sneaky feeling that it's going to get sentimental. Sentimentality makes us a little edgy.

But I think I can say with some confidence that everyone here has had a mother. And we owe to our mothers the fundamental human gift of life itself. Whatever else they may or may not have given us, they give us that first possibility of life and hope.

The family, like the church, doesn't always live up to its potential. But it's another great context for us to discover and live out the life of the age to come. And that's what human life in this age is for. As we befriend one another, we create a kind of existence for others and even for ourselves that we could never have found simply and purely on our own.

I don't mean that God is totally helpless in the matter without us. God, too, participates in this exchange of gifts. Jesus, after all, steps in where the paralyzed man's own family and friends have apparently failed him. There's a case, in Blake's terms, of "the immediate inspiration of God." But it still took two people to make one person whole.

So God settles into the New Jerusalem with us, and the "advice of a friend" becomes indistinguishable from "the immediate inspiration of God." God becomes our neighbor. God is part of the community of friends.

And it doesn't just wait on the life of the age to come. Wherever we go, we shall find the age to come already at work in the here and now. It isn't perfectly achieved. It isn't perfectly revealed. It is often hard to discern, in fact, and falls far short of its goal.

Still, wherever it begins to overcome our paralysis, to release us from our dejection and sense of helplessness, to put us in touch with the power of hope, the generosity of love, to connect us to one another in new affection – it brings to our life here the first light that will become the full dawning as the city descends out of heaven, the city that is home to both us and God.

Our calling together at Good Shepherd is nothing less than to look forward to the descent of the City and to look for the signs of its coming here and now, in ourselves, in others, in the gifts we receive and give – and, when we find the signs, to greet them with joy and hope and love.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, am I? No, I'm just reminding us all that we have further to go into the delights of the age to come. And it is never too soon to begin.